

Cesar at the Laundromat

By Gary M. Almeter

I had been teaching at private high school in Boston. My fiancée had been working at an academic press in Boston. What better way to test our mutual mettle than plying our collective skill sets in the Big Apple? I am neither too proud nor too immune to cliché to say that we thought that if we could make it there we could make it anywhere, both professionally and domestically.

The years I taught at a private high school in Boston, I taught a myriad poems and short stories by white American authors to boys who would go to some Ivy League school whether I was there or not. I wanted to teach at an authentic New York City public school, like in the movies. I wanted teaching to be a transformative endeavor - resulting in metamorphoses.

So that summer, the summer of 1998 when the world feasted on Bill and Monica and people left their jobs in droves for dot coms and wealth seemed possible just by walking out your front door, I delved into the works of black and Latino authors and prepared lessons therefrom. I was elated when I read Henry Louis Gates's essay "In The Kitchen" about the hair straightening rituals he endured as a child and used it as the foundation of an entire unit I called "Assimilation." I couldn't wait to empower and lead and transform.

The first day of school was enlightening. The kids I taught were poor but resilient, newly emigrated and proud. It became evident very early that they regularly endured more than any kid should. But they stayed kids. The students' reading levels made it apparent that they weren't ready for Henry Louis Gates. Nonetheless, I reveled in being a teacher. It seemed easy to make a difference. I called students in the morning to make sure they were awake and going to school and they respected me for that. I patted them on the back when they walked into the classroom. They were rarely touched with any affection.

Surprisingly, at least to me, my students were more responsive when they could escape into a new world rather than examine their own. My seniors had never read "Catcher in the Rye" so I taught that and they loved it, far more than they had "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." Stories of childhood trauma bored them they said with the aura of anyone who has been there, done that. Stories of people frolicking in other lands intrigued them. My freshman loved "Romeo & Juliet" far more than they had "The House on Mango Street." Oddly, they related to kids fighting with their parents much more than they could Esperanza's dreams of escaping her impoverished neighborhood. It turns out that empowerment came as readily and authentically from conquering the canon as much as it can come from stories of survival written by your people.

Quite a different phenomenon happened with the kids' writing. They were eager to look inward and share intimate details about their lives. When I asked kids to write fictional narratives I expected fancy sports cars and limousines, international trips and intrigue, but most of the time I got stories about gang bangers, abortion clinics, drug-addicted relatives and abusive uncles.

So they were simultaneously yearning to tell their stories while eager to hear the stories of someone else. I could understand that. I was eager to hear more about their worlds, about which I had little insight. I was also learning to see the value in expanding their world, fostering navigability through the white canon, even if it meant sacrificing awareness of their own. My goal had always been to provide them with the feeling that they had a place in public discourse; that they could be effective in whatever profession they chose; and to erase some of the cynicism that made them feel they could not make a difference. I was discovering a different pathway to that goal.

In December, I was tasked with going to listen to a band that my fiancée and I were considering hiring to play at our wedding reception. The Groove Bus was playing a holiday gig at the Windows on the World restaurant atop the World Trade Center's north tower. December is a particularly rough month in NYC, especially for those who do not live in a department store window or a neighborhood resembling such. The kids I taught were in what I would come to know as their chronic December funk, common with urban youth, precipitated by the onslaught of Christmas images and ideals and commercials. I found it exhausting – physically and emotionally. That summer, I had read "Santa Claus is A White Man" by John Henrik Clarke, the story of a black boy who encounters a racist Santa on his way to buy Christmas presents. I was determined, despite my recent epiphany, to read it with my classes and had done so that day. With disappointing results. So I secretly welcomed the opportunity to head out by myself and wallow.

I took the subway to the WTC, got off on the 105th Floor of the North Tower to several raucous holiday parties. I found Groove Bus and sat down at the bar. The Groove Bus played reception standards to which I listened disinterestedly, more intent on getting wasted than assessing their adeptness at replicating Kool and the Gang. I put my credit card on the bar and sat back to listen and watch the night's malfeasance unfold. It was a spectacular display; on several fronts. Outside, New York was lit up like a Christmas tree. Inside, there were hedge fund managers in sleek suits and with sleek hair frolicking with submissive women in festive crushed velvet dresses and trying-too-hard-to-be-festive stockings. I thought it all too spectacularly cliché to be true: the office party, the secretaries, the acquiescence, the yearning, the commuter train, the lip stick on the collar, the scents, the fornicating, the New Yorkness of it all. I, in my green sweater, blue jeans and brown loafers, seemed to be the only one not in a monochromatic shirt and tie and black suit. I was a confident man; but was learning that separateness can have a debilitating effect. I detected it with the haphazard and apathetic way the bartender made my drinks for me, the way girls seemed not to give me a second glance.

With regard to the economic disparity of the sort perpetually playing itself out in New York, I fancied myself both an observer and a participant. My students were poor. They wrote about things that astounded me. They had both a strength and a defeatism that perplexed me. I walked home from school feeling like the luckiest guy in the world; but after the walk home in one of the wealthiest zip codes in America, felt utterly despondent. So being here, amidst the excess, made me feel both disloyal and triumphant. At the very least, it was disorienting. For which world was I better suited?

Like a kid reading Shakespeare, there was an allure in the escape of the sort afforded by the WTC. In seeing how other people lived. In imaging their homes, their cars, their vacations, the shape of their swimming pools. Where nouns like summer double as verbs. But it also made me want to stand up and assert, "I am here too. Acknowledge me." Much like my kids did when they walked into a Gap and received no service.

After too much gin, I traced my steps back to the subway to wait for the 4-5-6. The next thing I recall I was being woken up by a conductor simultaneously shaking me and kicking me off the train with a mix of disgust, burliness and anger. My pants were wet; I had peed myself. I stumbled off the train. The cold and the wind sobered me up. I had clearly never been here before. I walked downstairs and saw from the sign on a produce that I was on West 167th Street. I had no Metro card and no money and decided that walking east was my best chance at finding an ATM.

It was late and there were no people. Anywhere. I walked past a few steel gated stores without seeing anyone, bumped into a few older men hanging out outside a bar another block east and saw a single older woman across the street. This is what it feels to be vulnerable I thought. This is how it feels to be scared.

After a couple more blocks, the urine on my jeans beginning to freeze, I heard someone say, "Mr. G" with both authority and confusion. It was Cesar, one of my students.

He was holding the door of a Laundromat open, gesturing me to come inside. His face evinced a look of sheer bewilderment. I followed him into the Laundromat and asked, probably slurred, “what are you doing here Cesar?”

“I live here.”

“No, in the laundromat. It’s almost 2:00 in the morning.” Looking at my watch.

“I had to wash my mom’s uniform. She didn’t get home until about midnight and has to go to her other job in the morning and then right to her job after that so needed a clean uniform.”

“A better question is what are you doing up here, Mr. G?”

I replied with nothing but an empty, shame-filled stare. And a few tears. I even felt my lip quiver from cold and disgrace as Cesar looked at my wet jeans and got a sense of what was happening.

“Laundry’s almost done. We can go back to my house and my uncle will drive you home.”

We sat in silence, me hoping I didn’t but knowing I did smell and he nonchalantly finishing his math homework as though this sort of encounter happened all the time. The dryer buzzed a few minutes later. Cesar removed the light blue shirt dress and folded it expertly. It had “Broadway Commercial Cleaning” embroidered on the left chest, over a big sprawling cursive “B.”

I walked with Cesar a few blocks back to his apartment, a six story brown brick building on 169th street, me in my piss-soaked jeans and sweater and barn jacket; Cesar in his jeans and white t-shirt and too-big black puffy coat. I waited in the vestibule as Cesar ran upstairs. The floor was littered with old mail, cigarette butts, dust balls. A few minutes later, Cesar and his uncle, a small man about my age, wearing Timberlands and a leather coat over a bath robe, came outside. The uncle, extending his hand, introduced himself, “I’m Javier.”

“Gary” I said and shook Javier’s hand, doing my best to convey some sort of authority, acting as though it wasn’t nearly 2:00 a.m. and acting as though I wasn’t his nephew’s English teacher standing there with piss-soaked dungarees.

Javier looked at me with a friendly face that displayed no judgment. We walked about a block and stopped at a brown Monte Carlo, probably a late 1970s model, with a tiny Puerto Rican flag hanging from the rear view mirror. Cesar told me to get in front as he climbed in the back seat. We drove south; and rode in silence. New York was still lit up like a Christmas tree, and the towers were visible in the distance. Presumably Groove Bus was packing up their instruments. I, again as though the normal tenets of etiquette applied to the situation, asked what Javier did for a living.

“I am taking some classes at City College. In the meantime, just working for my uncle doing asbestos abatement.”

“What kind of classes?”

“Working towards my degree in criminal justice. Hope to be a police officer and then work my way through law school”

It struck me that Javier was trying to impress me; me, the man who was sitting in piss soaked dungarees in the passenger side of his car; the man who probably owed them his life; the man who seemed to know absolutely nothing about anything. The inherent absurdity and absurd unfairness of this struck me with some force— even then; even in that compromised state.

We crossed over one of the bridges onto the Harlem River drive. Javier asked where I lived and I mumbled “East 86th.” I told Javier that the corner of York and 88th just off the FDR was fine but Javier said he’d be happy to take me home. For the first time, Cesar spoke, “Let him take you home Mr. G.”

I opened the large squeaky car door at the front of my building, turned around and shook Javier's and Cesar's hands, only later realizing that I had not washed my own since peeing myself. I thanked them and held the seat forward as Cesar climbed into the passenger seat. He put down a magazine over the wet spot I had left.

I took the elevator upstairs, took off my jeans, washed myself, put on my pajamas, and then went to the hallway, threw my jeans down the trash chute and then stealthily climbed into bed.

I was ready for work and out the door before my fiancée woke up. I walked the three blocks to school, checked my mailbox, made some photocopies (kids would be doing worksheets that day as I was hung over as fuck) then went to my classroom where I waited for the tumult of the day – and my demise - to begin.

Cesar nodded hello when he walked into class. No smile, no snicker, no indication that anything was amiss and certainly no indication that anyone else knew what had happened a few hours before. Because no one else did know what happened. Or ever would know what happened.

And I didn't say anything to Cesar.

Until the following week, on the last day of school before Christmas break. Cesar stayed after class to help me clean up. We chatted about school stuff. He told me he wasn't looking forward to break because he was always alone. I stopped myself before I could thank him or provide any commentary on his neighborhood or strategies or coping mechanisms. And I just let him talk.